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CONVERSION AS CONVERGENCE: GREGORY THE GREAT CONFRONTING PAGAN AND JEWISH INFLUENCES IN ANGLO-SAXON CHRISTIANITY

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In a famous letter written in July 601, Gregory the Great offers two pieces of advice to the party of Roman missionaries working in Anglo-Saxon England, regarding how they are to deal with the pagan past of their (prospective) converts. First, with regard to places of worship, Gregory proposes that pagan temples ought to be rid of their idols and consecrated as churches; second, with regard to religious celebration, that the pagan custom of ritual slaughter and feasting should be retained with certain adjustments. Particularly striking is the advice to include in the festivities the building of huts (tabernacula), from the boughs of trees, in which the worshipers may sojourn while feasting at the site of their converted church. Far from being a concession to English pagan usage, this seems to have been inspired by the Jewish festival of Sukkot, the feast of tabernacles, as described in the Old Testament and practiced by early-medieval Jews.

Gregory’s letter, addressed to Abbot Mellitus and meant to be relayed by him to the missionaries, goes on to argue that the Anglo-Saxons will be more receptive to Christianity if the change is incremental. “For there is no doubt that it is impossible to cut away everything at the same time from hardened minds, because anyone who strives

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1 S. Gregorii Magni Regiariwm episcoporum, ed. Dagvid Nieborg, 2 vols, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina (hereafter CCSL) 140, 140A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1982), XI 56 (hereafter Reg. ep.).
2 It is not clear whether Gregory’s advice was ever put into practice. David Wilson, Anglo-Saxon Paganism (London: New York: Routledge, 1992), 29–43, finds no indication in the literature that pagan sites of worship were converted into churches. Floris Spiegel, “The Tabernacula of Gregory the Great and the Conversion of Anglo-Saxon England,” Anglo-Saxon England 36 (November 14, 2007): 6–10 (hereafter Spiegel, “The tabernacula”), on the other hand, offers archaeological and literary evidence that Gregory’s instructions to construct tabernacula may have been carried out in at least some cases.
to ascend to the highest place, relies on ladders or steps. He is not lifted up in one leap.\textsuperscript{4} But in other letters Gregory's attitude is markedly different: "hasten down the worship of idols, and overturn the building of temples" ( \textit{Idolorum cultus insequere, fatorum adeo cæcæ, cæcia suæ}). He writes to King Æthelbert of Kent only a few weeks earlier.\textsuperscript{5} This harsher approach accords better with what we know of Gregory's missionary strategy in other regions: where paganism is found in Sicily, Sardinia, and Francia, we find him encouraging bishops and aristocrats alike to repress it forcefully.\textsuperscript{6} There is also support for the use of force to aid Christianization in Gregory's theological works: in his \textit{Moralia}, Gregory compares the power wielded by temporal rulers to the strength of the rhinoceros—just as the rhinoceros breaks up the earth enabling it to be cultivated, the Christian ruler crushes the wicked and allows the church to flourish.\textsuperscript{7} This makes Gregory's leniency towards English paganism in his letter to Mellitus surprising.

Surprising also is his deliberate importation of a Jewish custom into the English context. Not only because there was no precedent for such an appropriation, but because Gregory would normally balk at the idea of Christians applying the letter of the Law to themselves in such a manner. His preference for a spiritual understanding of the Hebrew scriptures expresses itself throughout his exegetical works. An extended argument for the spiritual reading of the Old Testament opens his commentary on the Song of Songs. To heed only the literal sense, he writes, is like noticing only the colors of a painting and paying no attention to the objects it depicts. Changing the metaphor, he compares the literal sense to the husk in which the kernel of the spiritual sense is hidden: to approach the text only in a literal way is to eat the husks as animals do.\textsuperscript{8} Turning from his exegesis to his correspondence, we find Gregory working to "prevent encroachments of Jews and Judaism on Christianity" and "respond[ing] vehemently to reports of Judaizing among Christians."\textsuperscript{9} In several letters he renounces Jewish ownership of Christian slaves, because this situation provides "opportunity for simple souls to be slaves [...] to the Jewish superstition" (\textit{occasioem, ut superstitioni judaicae similes animae [...] deseruerent}).\textsuperscript{10} In a letter to the citizens of Rome, Gregory objects to Christians observing the Sabbath, a practice he connects to the coming of the antichrist who "compels the people to live like Jews [...] so that he may recall the external rite of the law and subject the perfidy of the Jews to him-self."\textsuperscript{11} (\textit{judicatique populum compellit, ut exteriorum ritum legis reveocet et sibi iudaearum perfidiam subdatur}).\textsuperscript{12} Gregory impresses upon his addresses that "after the appearance of the grace of almighty God, our Lord Jesus Christ, the precepts of the law that were said figuratively could not be observed to the letter" (\textit{postquam gratia omnipotentis dei dominus noster iesus christi apparuerit, praecepta legis, quae per figuram dicta sunt, iuxta litteram servare non possunt}).\textsuperscript{13}

Given that in his other writing Gregory tends to resist pagan and Jewish influences on the Christian church, his suggestion in his letter to Mellitus, that a space be created for such influences within the life of the new English church, requires explanation.

\textit{July 601: A Turning Point}\textsuperscript{14}

Scholars have sought that explanation in the context of the letter. Dated 18 July 601, it is Gregory's latest surviving statement on the English mission. That mission had been underway for several years by the time the letter was written; the missionary

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\textsuperscript{4} "Nam dum mentibus simul omnia absurda absurdeimus esse non dubium est, quia summurum lexum ascenderet inultum gradibus ut passibus, non autem saevitias eleuantur." \textit{Ep. XLVI.} John R.C. Martyn, \textit{trans., The Letters of Gregory the Great, Medieval Sources in Translation 40} (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2004), 803 (hereafter Martyn, \textit{Letters}).


\textsuperscript{6} Gregory's letter to Æthelbert should not be read as literally instructing the king to overturn the destruction of pagan shrines. Its focus, however, is on the king's spiritual formation, rather than on his people's conversion, and this document therefore cannot be read as a programmatic statement of Gregory's wishes for the Anglo-Saxon mission. I remain unconvinced that Gregory never meant his instructions in this letter to be followed.


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\textsuperscript{9} Sanctorum Gregorii Magni \textit{Expositio in canticum canticorum in libros primam regem}, ed. Patrick Vehrenken, CC SL 344 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1966), 64 (hereafter \textit{Expositio in canticum canticorum}).


\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Ep. XIII.1}, Martyn, \textit{Letters}, 622.

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Augustine and his party had arrived in Kent and been welcomed there by King Æbelberht and Queen Bertha in 597. In the spring of 601, the priest Laurence and monk Peter returned to Rome from the mission field with news, and Gregory sent them on their way again in June, after what appears to have been a short stay of only a few weeks. They departed with a second party of missionaries under the leadership of Abbot Mellitus. This party carried, among other things, a "pallium" for Augustine, instructions for the organization of two archdioceses in Britain, and letters to Æbelberht and Bertha, praising their reception of the first mission party and exhorting them to continue Christianizing their subjects. These letters are dated 22 June. The letter to Mellitus, which strikes such a discordant note with Gregory's policy until then, follows less than a month later, while Mellitus is still "in Francia" (in francus). Robert Markus and others have seen it as a belated response to Gregory's receipt of news from the mission field; once the flurry of activity involved in sending off the new missionary party had passed, Gregory had the chance to reconsider the information he had received from Peter and Laurence, and came to realize its implications for his missionary approach. The insight gained by Gregory tends to be envisioned as political in nature: the authority of the papacy in Anglo-Saxon England was somewhat less, and the court of Æbelberht somewhat more reluctant, than anticipated. Since Gregory was unable to gain the necessary support from the local aristocracy, it is argued, he was unable to use his preferred coercive methods, and had to advocate a milder approach.

But does Gregory's advice to Mellitus really represent the abandonment of his usual principles for the sake of expediency? Gregory was not only an administrator, but also a theologian with a deep concern for harmony between faith and action. In order to properly understand Gregory's mildness in the letter to Mellitus and its motivations, we must therefore consider his missionary strategy in Anglo-Saxon England against the backdrop of his general understanding of conversion and spiritual formation.

Gregory's Theology of Spiritual Progress

Gregory's views on conversion and spiritual progress are intimately tied to his ideas about human nature and the processes by which God draws human beings to himself. His missionary strategy and pastoral approaches are informed by the dealings of God with mankind from the beginning of the world to its end, as described in the Old and New Testaments. Gregory's understanding of the human condition begins with the fall of Adam and the expulsion of man from Paradise. Ever since, humanity has been blind, cold, and lost. It chases after empty philosophies, false gods, and material goods, but divine grace seeks humanity out, meeting human beings where they are, condescending to speak to them in the terms of their limited and wayward hearts and minds.

Divine speech is communicated to the cold and numb soul by means of enigmas and in a hidden manner instills in her the love she does not know by means of what she knows. Allegory provides the soul set far below God with a kind of cranie whereby she may be lifted to God. If enigmas are placed between God and the soul, when the soul recognizes something of her own in the language of the enigmas, through the meaning of this language she understands something that is not her own and by means of earthly languages hopes for eternal things.

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14 To Bertha: XL 35; to Æbelberht: XL 37; to Augustine: XL 36 and XL 39. Letters were sent at the same time to several bishops the missionaries would encounter on their way through Gaul (XL 34, XL 36, XL 40, XL 41, XL 41 and XL 45), Kings Theodore (XL 47), Theodore (XL 49), and Clovis (XXV 51) and Queen Brictius (XL 48).
17 Clara Stanciule, "Kings and Conversion: Some Comparisons between the Roman Mission to England and Patrik's in Ireland," Prájmatokológiai Széria 14 (1980): 60 n.12, points in a helpful direction by noting that Gregory often plays "two apparently contradictory approaches" because to him they are not contradictory, but complementary. The two letters do not represent a complete change of mind, but rather a shifting of focus. Conte, "Gregorio Magno e gli Anglosassoni," 476–477 makes a similar point.
19 Demarcopoulou, "Gregory and the Pagan Striine."
20 In coenonis canonicis, 1;1; Homiliea in Evangelra, ed. Raymond Easa (Tournai: Brepols, 1999), 1.2.1 (hereafter Homiliea in Evangelra), Moralia V.34, VIII.30, IX.33.
21 "Iste re per quodam enigmata sermon divinum animae terrenit et fugiaturque et de repreh, quaerit, late- niter mutantes et ammort, quom non noscere. Allegorica enim animae longa de positae quasi quaedam machinae fuis, ut per illam leviter ad desum. Interposuerunt grunde enigmaticum, dum quadam in verbis cognoscit, quod inuenit, in se suis verborum intelligit, quod non est numer, et per termina verba separatur a terra." In coenonis canonicis, 1;1; Mark D' lovaglia, trans., Gregory the Great on the Song of Songs, Cistercian Studies Series 244 (Liturgical Press, 2012), 109.
Gregory's main concern is not exactly where a person is on that great continuum between pedition and perfection, but that he should be making constant progress. To this end, both discipline and teaching must be tailored to fit the needs of the situation.26

Now the preacher should realise that he must not overtax the mind of his hearer, lest, so to speak, the string of the soul be strained too much and snap... Wherefore, Paul says: I could not speak to you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal. As unto little children in Christ, I gave you milk to drink, not meat... So, the true preacher proclaims plain truths to hearts still in the dark, showing them no hidden mysteries. Then only are they to learn all the profounder things of Heaven, when they approach the light of truth.27

We can take three points from this that are helpful to the present discussion. First, the ascent of humanity to divinity is made possible and initiated by the descent of divinity to humanity.28 God condescends to those he seeks to convert. Secondly, change for Gregory is incremental, so much so that the transition from one stage to the next is often not clearly defined, and it is not always easy to determine where a person sits on the spectrum of spiritual states. And finally, spiritual development and growth are proper to everyone. Not only the heathen must be converted, but the Christian, too, must ever be converted anew.29

27 "Seecundum etsi praecinctum eum, ut audissent ut minimo uterius sine novis habent, no, ut ipsa discipulam, quam satis audiremus, mentis omnium factarum... Hinc paulum iustitium est, ut non notissimi quibusque spiritualis, sed quasi carnalibus. Tamquam paradisum in christo locis nostris potius dedit, non exam. ...qui recte praecipui, ob.commititur ambitio suavis, optavis mentem etiam auctum..." Regale Pastoralis, ed. Franciscum Pastoralis, Bibliotheca Latina. Vox (Bibliotheca Latina), 213–221.
29 Katharina Gressh, Die Moralis in Job Gregorii de Grossen: ein christologisch-ekklesiologischer Kommentar, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 31 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 243; Degen, Saint Grégoire, 263; Markoe, Signs and Meanings, 47.
The Gradual Progress of the English

Against this theoretical backdrop, Gregory’s comment about the conversion of the English, that progress is made step by step, not by leaps and bounds, makes perfect sense. The ideas of incremental growth and tailored pastoral care are everywhere in Gregory’s work, and find their outworking here, too.

The preservation of certain elements of the pagan religion of the Anglo-Saxons becomes for Gregory a way of helping them ascend the ladder to the knowledge and love of Christ one rung at a time. Beginning from complete ignorance of God, the next rung of the ladder for the Anglo-Saxons is one associated in Gregory’s mind with a “Jewish” kind of faith; one in which God becomes known as the Lawgiver deserving of obedience and worship, but is not yet known as beloved Savior. Perhaps this explains his appropriation of a Jewish festival in order to begin to steer the Anglo-Saxons from their pagan feasts towards Christian worship: Gregory is seeking in his dealings with the Anglo-Saxons to emulate God’s dealings with humanity, leading them to Christ by way of the Old Testament.30 He makes the comparison between the English and the Israelites explicit in the letter to Mellius, pointing to biblical precedent for the appropriation and reinterpretation of pagan sacrifices: “Even so, the Lord certainly made himself known to the people of Israel in Egypt, and yet he kept their use of sacrifices, which they used to offer to the devil in worshipping him, for their own sacrifice” (Sic traditio populo in aegypto dominus se quidem invenit, sed tamen eis sacrificiorum usus, quae diablo seditibus exhibere, in cultu proprio reservatus).31

But it is never Gregory’s intention that the spiritual development of the English should be arrested at this level. In the individual, certain vices can be tolerated for a time to facilitate the correction of others, but in the end all vice must be eradicated.32 Just so, Gregory’s hope for the English church is that it will progress towards and ultimately attain the perfection towards which the whole church, indeed all of humanity, strains. He is therefore careful to give what pagan and Jewish elements he allows a Christian interpretation. The slaughter of oxen is to take place “on the day of a dedication, or on the birthdays of holy martyrs” (die dedications vel natalis sanctorum martyrum) and is to be done “in praise of God” (ad laudem deo). Like the ancient Israelites, they are to offer their sacrifices with “changed hearts” (cor mutantes), doing so “for the true God and not for the idols” (vero deo et non idolis) so that “they would no longer be the same sacrifices” (sae tur sacrificia ipsa non essent).33

**Notes:**

31 Regula Pastoralis, III.38.
32 Reg. op., XI.56; Martyr, Letters, 803.
33 Reg. op., XI.56; Martyr, Letters, 803.
34 Reg. op., XI.56; Martyr, Letters, 803.
35 Reg. op., XI.37; Martyr, Letters, 783.
37 Monita, XIX.27.50 and XII.52.59 indicate that some convert but make no progress and some convert but soon fall back to their old ways. Homiliae in Evangelia, II.38.15 gives a specific example of three sisters, two of whom progress in love for God but one of whom sees her love fade over time and eventually returns to the love of the world. Cited in Degen, Saint Grégoire, 264–265.
38 “Dum enim quippeam ad baptismum femen [... ] personem, ad psittacismus superstitiones remiendent de detesta sua mentis.” Reg. op., I.45. Likewise, to begin to be converted to Christ and then remain stagnant will ultimately lead to regress. Faith and baptism are sufficient to grant entry to the church, but only those who go on to add the chief virtue of charity to their faith will be allowed to remain inside. Homiliae in Evangelia, II.38; Pietroso, Das Kirchenverständnis Gregors des Großen, 289–90.
final judgment could not be far. It was therefore of the essence that those who had once embraced Christ not grow lax and revert to godless ways.

Until June 601, Gregory seems to have believed that the English were already swiftly advancing in their spiritual journey. Already in his commentary on Job, written before the first departure of his missionaries, he makes mention of recent conversions in England: "see, the tongue of Britain, which knew nothing but barbarous gnashing, has now begun to resound in divine praise with the Hebrew 'alleluia' (ece lingua britanniae, quae nihil alio adveret, quam barbarum frenderere, iam sudum in divini laudibus hebrenium coepit alleluias resonare)." He thus seems to have thought, when he sent Augustine and his companions on their way, that there was already a significant Christian presence in England. To what extent British Christianity survived the adventus Saxorum remains a subject of scholarly debate, but it is likely that Gregory was not wrong to expect the English to have some familiarity with Christianity already. Bertha herself was a Christian, and had brought a bishop with her from Francia upon her marriage to Æthelbert, which may indicate a Frankish interest in converting the English. By the time Gregory sent Augustine forth in the summer of 596, he had heard that the English were eager for conversion and had asked "priests from the vicinity (sacerdotes et vicinio) to preach to them, but had been rebuffed. He therefore had every reason to expect Augustine's mission to be a swift success, and indeed the first reports appeared to confirm this expectation. In July of 598, he wrote to Eulogius of Alexandria that

... now letters have already reached us about [Augustine's] safety and work, stating that either he, or those who crossed over with him, are ablaze with such great miracles among that same race [of the English], that they seem to be imitating the virtues of the apostles with the proofs they provide. And in the solemnity of our Lord's nativity, which

60 Moraux, XXXVII.11.


63 Liudhard's episcopal statement suggests that he may have been expected to work on converting the Anglo-Saxons. Arnold Janssen, "The Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons Considered Against the Background of the Early Medieval Mission," Storia del teatro dell'arte italiano di stoffe sull'altro mediterraneo 32 (1985): 779–780.

64 "en monre de [Augustin] sakte et opere ad nos scripta penamur, quia tanta miseria vel ipse adhuc qui eam ex transmittit in [Anglorum] gente eadem conuenit, saltem apostolorum nuntiis in signis quae exhibent immitti videtur. In sollemnitatem dominicae nativitatis, quae hac primum indicione transacta est, plus quam decem milia angli ebodem munati sunt fratre et coepiscopo nostro hapsidae." Reg. ep., VIII.29; Martin, Letters, 524.

65 Reg. ep., XI.36; Martyr, Letters, 779.

to July 601. This lengthy letter is a collection of Gregory’s answers to questions put to him by Augustine, and its tone is remarkably consonant with that of the letter to Melleius. Again and again, Gregory points to the biblical Law as an important source of insight for the Christian community in England, suggesting that Gregory imagines the Anglo-Saxon community as one that is, like the ancient Hebrews, halfway between paganism and mature Christianity. The writing of this extended reply to questions arising from the mission field may even have been a catalyst for the change in Gregory’s thinking about the English mission. His letter to Melleius certainly suggests that he has spent some time thinking things over—"tell them what I have long pondered over, while thinking about the case of the English" (dicite et quid diu me cunm de causa anglorum cognitum tractauer)—and formulating his responses to Augustine would have given him occasion to do so.00

**Conclusion**

Many scholars have pointed out the apparent tension between Gregory’s instruction that Roman missionaries fuse and adapt pagan ritual and Jewish tradition into a Christian festival practice involving the construction of tabernacula (reminiscent of the Jewish Sukkot celebration) and feasting (with echoes of Germanic pagan sacrifice), and the harsher approach to mission advocated in other letters, both to Inulair and continental correspondents. Rather than suppose that Gregory would have preferred to use coercion in Anglo-Saxon England, but found it impossible, we can understand Gregory’s softer approach as a reflection of his theological ideas about conversion and spiritual formation as a single, incremental and continuous process, in which progress is driven by divine condescension. His exhortation that Æthelbert act forcefully against pagan remnants in his domain, on the other hand, flowed from a belief that the English had already made significant strides forward in their spiritual journey, and were now in danger of relapse into their old sins. Both letters can thus be understood from the perspective of Gregory’s theology of spiritual progress and regress and his attendant ideas about pastoral practice. Gregory’s change of heart in the summer of 601 suggests that he came to a new appreciation of just how far the English still had to come before they reached his Christian ideal. He concluded that this people was in need of a gradual introduction to Christianity, mirroring the slow revelation of God in providential history, and accommodations could be made accordingly. But, as his harsher statements remind us, Gregory considered the preservation of pagan ritual, and the infusion of Jewish elements into it, only a provisional measure. Development towards a fuller Christian spirituality and lifestyle was still expected to lead to the abandonment of such props, and convergence with the wider Christian tradition.01

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01 Bill Fiennes, “Answers and Echoes: The Libellus Responsionum and the Hagiography of North-Western Euro- pean Mission,” Early Medieval Europe 14, no. 2 (2006): 164, argues that (Bede’s version of) the Libellus sug- gests that at the time of writing the English still knew little or nothing about Christianity, and that Gregory’s directions make more sense as a “concession to new converts, not lapsed church members.”

02 Reg. ep., XI56; Martyr, Letters, 81G.